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Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission

Public Hearing on Immigrant Integration
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Summary

Policy-makers and the general public did not embrace the recommendations of the 1997 United States Commission on Immigration Reform for two reasons:

First, its call to revive the Americanization movement was undone by the vagueness of the concept and the deep disagreements over its meaning.

Second, the Commission lacked an identifiable constituency to advance its' views.

In response to the deep disagreements over the meaning of Americanization, the Little Hoover Commission should stress both social and civic integration.

In response to the lack of an identifiable constituency, the Little Hoover Commission must foster greater public engagement by decentralizing and diversifying the organizations involved in a modern immigrant policy.

Introduction

As chair of the 1997 bipartisan Commission on Immigration Reform (CIR), Barbara Jordan called for reviving programs that Americanize new immigrants. She claimed that "Americanization earned a bad reputation when it was stolen by racists and xenophobes in the 1920s." "But," she added provocatively, "it is our word and we are taking it back."

The Immigration Commission reminded us in its report to Congress that the country has paid little attention to programs that integrate immigrants into American society and civic culture. It pointedly asked, "What do we expect of the immigrants we admit, and how will we receive them?"

Immigrants and ordinary Americans have been concerned about these issues for some time. Policy analysts, who have focused more on the economic aspects of immigration, have begun to

look at the broader themes of how immigrants become citizens and a part of American society. In 1997, Congress asked what should be done.
In October of that year, I gathered thirty-five men and women representing government, universities, and nonprofit organizations at the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke University to undertake the first major analysis of the Commission's Report to Congress, *Becoming an American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy*. The Duke Workshop concentrated on the second of the Commission's two themes, *immigrant* policy (what happens to immigrants in America), rather than on *immigration* policy (how many and what kind of immigrants are allowed entry). Our analysis and findings are reported in *Becoming American/America Becoming: The Final Report of the Duke Workshop on Immigration and Citizenship* and are explored in greater depth in a scholarly volume, *Immigration and Citizenship in the 21st Century*.

I have been asked to describe the recommendations of the CIR, to explain the controversy they raised, and to explore why their recommendations were not embraced by policy makers and the general public. What lessons does the fate of the CIR hold for the Little Hoover Commission's report on immigrant integration?

The United States Commission on Immigration Reform

The Final Report of the Commission on Immigration Reform, *Becoming an American*, was the fruit of five years of work by a bipartisan, congressionally appointed body. Americanization, according to the Commission, is the process of cultivating a shared commitment to the values of liberty, democracy, and equal opportunity. It is not a process aimed solely at immigrants: Americans, too, must join in the heroic struggle to live up to these principles.

The Commission characterized Americanization as a two-way process, in which immigrants become part of our communities and by which our communities and the nation learn from and adapt to their presence. It imposes mutual obligations: immigrants must obey U.S. laws, pay taxes, and respect other cultures and ethnic groups; and citizens must provide an environment in which newcomers can become fully participating members of American society.

The Commission asked the federal government to help immigrants and their new communities learn about their mutual rights and responsibilities, to provide the information they need for successful integration, and to encourage the development of local resources for mediation. It urged a renewed commitment to the education of immigrant children and a new goal -- the rapid acquisition of English for all immigrant language instruction programs.

The Commission also asked for immigrant education funding to be based on a better assessment of the impacts of immigration on school systems and to cover the real costs of these impacts. It called on federal, state, and local governments and private institutions to improve educational opportunities for adult immigrants.

Lessons Learned

Policy-makers and the general public did not embrace the recommendations of the 1997 United States Commission on Immigration for two reasons.

First, the Commission fell victim to the culture wars. Its call to revive the Americanization movement was undone by the vagueness of the concept and the deep disagreements over its meaning.

Commentators offered an extraordinarily wide range of views, from vigorously condemning the concept to eagerly embracing it. Some applauded the Commission's emphasis on shared values, but worried that it masks the fact that Americans deeply disagree on how to realize these principles. While many Americans believe that our values oblige us to provide group entitlements to new immigrants, many other Americans regard such efforts as the betrayal of those same values and a disservice to immigrants. Still others noted that the Commission treats assimilation as a panacea for our troubles, but successful assimilation has often produced group competition and conflict.

Some observers worried that the Commission lists a number of obligations on the part of the host society, such as federal support and public-private partnerships to sustain various programs that help orient newcomers, but is strangely silent on the question of what, aside from learning English, citizens could or should ask of immigrants. In contrast, others thought that the discrimination newcomers face constitutes the major problem to be eradicated, not their lack of knowledge about, or commitment to, America.

Many applauded the Commission for characterizing Americanization as a two-way street. But what, they asked, does this metaphor actually mean? How wide are the lanes? Do traffic patterns reflect rush hour, with most people traveling in one direction? Underlying these questions and the divergent interpretations of integration as a two-way street we find competing views of American identity, assimilation and multiculturalism, and the past and future of Americanization. The Commission’s recommendations were lost in the welter of this confusion and conflict.

Second, the Commission lacked an identifiable constituency to advance its’ views.

Many foundations and organizations that aid newcomers focus on protecting immigrants' rights and easing their adjustment to American life; they are wary of engaging in a broader program of integration, especially one called Americanization. On the other hand, foundations and organizations that decry the dissolution of a common American identity, the erosion of citizenship as a meaningful category, and weakened civic attachment have very little to do with newcomers.

While many observers worried that a revival of the Americanization movement would lead to coercion and exclusion, in fact what resulted was passive neglect. This neglect reflected the division between organizations focused on immigrants and those that emphasize citizenship, and, more broadly, the difficulty of getting a nation of non-judgmental, middle-class citizens who are increasingly disconnected from one another to take an active role in incorporating newcomers. It reflected Americans' essentially laissez-faire attitude toward immigrants – that if we just get out of the way, and especially get misguided ethnic advocates out of the way, then things will be fine. The result of all this is that public and private efforts are now less likely to focus on what sorts of policies and alliances need to be forged in order to build the institutional infrastructure for incorporating newcomers.

Recommendations

In a nation of immigrants, debates over the meaning of citizenship are especially complicated. These debates are dominated by emotionally charged, polarized arguments and drastic solutions: either we end all immigration or we open our borders to virtually anyone; either we eradicate all sub-national ethnic identities or we reinforce them at all costs. It is increasingly difficult to hold a thoughtful discussion among Americans who disagree on the relation between immigration and civic identity but who fall between the extremes of the debate. This difficulty is compounded by the complexity of getting scholars, practitioners, and public officials to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

We might be tempted to conclude from the culture war that raged over the concept of Americanization, and from the lack of any broad constituency to advance the CIR's strategy for incorporating immigrants, that any further such efforts are likely to be fruitless; or, alternatively, that such efforts should concentrate narrowly on practical matters and that they should be funneled through established immigrant-aid organizations. I would urge the Little Hoover Commission not to draw either of these conclusions. Instead, I would suggest that two very different lessons can be learned from the fate of the U. S. Commission on Immigration Reform.

First, in response to the deep disagreements over the meaning of Americanization, the Little Hoover Commission should stress both social and civic integration.

A modern immigrant policy should strengthen the linkage between naturalization and political participation. It should protect immigrants' rights, assist them in negotiating the naturalization process, expand their opportunities to learn English, open welcoming centers that provide practical information like subway maps and INS forms, and offer functional information on basic governmental organizations and services.

A modern immigrant policy should also emphasize that integration requires more than simply assenting to a vague set of political principles and participating in politics; it involves a

transformative experience, one that commits new citizens to new rights and responsibilities and to a new identity as a member of the American people. While the political, social, and emotional processes involved in becoming an American take place in a variety of venues over an extended period of time, integration programs should emphasize the importance of newcomers' making a considered act of commitment to their new identity. The immigrant should understand the specific values and history that characterize the American experiment in free government. Hence, integration must involve a significant emphasis on civic education.

There is a revealing contrast between the incorporation of immigrants in Western Europe and in the United States. The Europeans, on the whole, provide a wide range of social benefits and local voting rights to non-citizens. The United States provides fewer social benefits to non-citizens and has resisted sporadic efforts to offer local voting rights to immigrants before they naturalize. For many Europeans, the American model is seriously deficient. Yet that model presumes that newcomers will eventually be recognized as Americans. By contrast, the European approach has offered a way to avoid the higher costs of fully incorporating immigrants as equal citizens and members of a shared national identity. It has used multiculturalism as an excuse for denying access to full political participation and membership in the national body. The American model faces serious challenges today, but the turmoil over immigration that is roiling Europe indicates the perils involved in disaggregating collective identity, political membership, and social rights.

Second, In response to the lack of an identifiable constituency, the Little Hoover Commission must foster greater public engagement by decentralizing and diversifying the organizations involved in a modern immigrant policy.

Despite deep disagreements, participants at the Duke Workshop on Immigration and Citizenship agreed that the task of integrating newcomers must be shared by both immigrants and American citizens. Any attempt at incorporating immigrants must be part of a larger effort to prepare all Americans for responsible civic roles. The challenge of integrating immigrants into American society and civic culture presents an important opportunity for revitalizing citizenship in general. Voluntary associations, foundations, businesses, and federal, state, and local governments should coordinate an immigrant policy that draws on the strength of local communities and renews a robust sense of citizenship among the American people.

The Americanization movement of the teens and twenties offers important lessons for today. The movement properly earned a bad reputation in the 1920s; some of its programs could be crude and coercive. But its original inspiration was appropriate and should be honored. At its best, Americanization offered immigrants an invitation that is often absent today, an invitation to think deeply about their new identity and to take seriously their role in the public life of a new country. It showed how a large foreign-born population could be helped to acquire a voluntary attachment to American political ideals and civic culture, while learning English. The Americanization movement in the 1910s and 1920s offered an example of how the commitments newcomers make increase support for their inclusion.

An equilibrium between commitment and support also characterized the debate over the Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986. An amnesty for illegal immigrants received public support in part because it stressed that a commitment to citizenship would be expected of qualified applicants and because it was balanced by employer sanctions. By emphasizing the process of civic education and the obligations aliens would undertake, proponents of the bill overcame the reluctance of some representatives to support the newcomers. Immigrants flocked to IRCA's programs, often attending class well beyond the required forty hours and compelling some localities to establish twenty-four-hour schools for citizenship.

The Commission has challenged Americans to fulfill their part of the covenant between immigrants and citizens. Yet, while many citizens have expressed concern over immigration and the naturalization process, few have helped newcomers become Americans. The Legislature and grantmakers should help local institutions incorporate immigrants in a manner that both protects their rights and strengthens a common citizenship. These institutions will in turn be strengthened by taking on such an urgent responsibility. Businesses that benefit from large numbers of immigrants (hotels, health care facilities, restaurants, and so on) must also heed the Commission's challenge to support programs that emphasize skills training, English instruction, and civic education.

Courses that help immigrants prepare for the naturalization examination should involve groups that already work directly with immigrants, as well as those civic groups that worry about the declining value of citizenship. Thus, in addition to immigrant-aid organizations, a modern immigrant policy should include groups like the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Rotary International, and the Lions Clubs. Joint projects, in particular, can address concerns both about the integrity and substance of the naturalization process as well as its fairness.

These projects could help alienated residents as well as resident aliens. Citizenship courses would engage citizens in the naturalization process while establishing a community infrastructure for new citizens in the naturalization process and beyond. At a time when major studies are lamenting the decline of grassroots organizations, immigrants are flocking to hometown associations that offer members valuable material benefits and serve as arenas for formal and informal engagement with the larger society. The Little Hoover Commission should seek to revitalize American civil society by linking a wide range of civic organization with these new institutions that are emerging in immigrant communities.